

Title/Topic of Lesson: War Reporting: The Military, the Media, and the First Amendment

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Subject/Grade Level: 12<sup>th</sup> Grade American Government or Civics

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Essential "Guiding Question" for the Lesson:

How can the media's responsibility to thoroughly disseminate accurate information to the American people in a timely fashion be balanced with the military's obligation to protect sensitive information?

Florida Sunshine State Standard Addressed in this Lesson:

(SS.C.1.4) #4 "understands the role of special interest groups, political parties, the media, public opinion, and majority/minority conflicts in the development of public policy and the political process."

#### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- ☆ The student will be able to identify the Bill of Rights, and more specifically, the First Amendment, as the source of our free press.
- ☆ To help build an understanding of the fragile relationship between the media and the military, the student will analyze real military scenarios and weigh the consequences of the media reporting on each scenario.
- ☆ The student will categorize the military scenarios based upon appropriateness for media coverage, thus enabling them to comprehend the sometimes-limited nature of free press.

#### LESSON CONTENT

The first Amendment to the United States Constitution provides that Congress shall make no law...abridging the freedom of the press. In drafting this amendment, the Founders affirmed the basic belief that a free press is necessary to both serve as a government watchdog and provide citizens with accurate information, free of government interference. But should there be limits to what the press can and cannot report, especially during times of war? What if coverage of a military operation could compromise the mission, and perhaps put soldiers' lives in danger? Should the military leadership conceal information about that operation from the media, or just flat out prohibit them from reporting on it? Would doing so be a violation of the First Amendment? Would not doing so be dangerously irresponsible? Needless to say, the military and the media historically share a complicated relationship. Ultimately, they both exist to serve the American people. Unfortunately, they all too often work at cross-purposes, making it difficult for both to do their job and do the right thing. Therefore, what we find is a constitutional dilemma: balancing the preamble's call to provide for the common defense with the First Amendment's protecting of a free press.

#### STUDENT GROUPING:

Students will be placed in small groups of between 5 and 6 students, with each group representing a different media outlet. With this arrangement, groups will be small enough to ensure that everyone has a role, thus minimizing the likelihood that a student will be uninvolved. On the other hand, the group is large enough to make it more challenging for students to reach consensus.

## METHODS

Think-Pair-Share: Students will be asked a couple of questions to consider, share with a partner, and share with the class. This method will serve as an introduction to the topic of the day, as well as a low-risk warm-up to the group activity in which they will be participating.

Cooperative learning/simulation: Students will work in small groups and be presented with scenarios to which they must respond. This method forces students to deal with conflict (something that the military and media engage in every day) and practice appropriate dialogue and consensus building.

Class discussion: At the end of the activity, the teacher will lead a class discussion to wrap-up the day's topic and talk about what was learned. This method allows students to process any feelings or opinions that they may have about the topic, as well as, use the time to ask any lingering questions they still have.

## ACTIVITIES

### ☆ Opening

- Display the words of the First Amendment on the front board and underline the words "freedom of the press." Instruct students to read the amendment and then ponder these questions quietly and individually:
  - Why did the Founders think it important to include freedom of press in our Constitution?
  - Should there be any limits on the freedom of the press? If so, when would it be appropriate for the government to limit what the media can and cannot report?
- After a couple of minutes, ask students to partner up and discuss those questions with their partner. Then, call on students to share with the class their thoughts (as well as their partner's thoughts) about the issue of free press.
- Before starting the activity, briefly go over the following vocabulary words with which your students may not be familiar:
  - embed - one that is embedded, especially a journalist who is assigned to an active military unit.
  - fratricide - discharge of a military weapon that injures or kills a member of one's own armed forces or an ally. Also known as friendly fire.

### ☆ Main Activity or Activities

- Place students in small groups of 5 to 6.
- Explain to students that each group represents a different news network and then assign each group a network name (i.e. CNN, MSNBC, Fox News, ABC, NBC, CBS).
- To make it more "real" for the students, distribute to each group a pre-made sign with their network logo on it.
- Explain to students that they are the leaders of their respective networks, and as such, it is their responsibility to decide what gets aired...oh, and by the way, our nation is at war.
- Tell them that they will be given different scenarios from our current military conflict, and that it is their job to decide whether or not their network runs the story (which also may include decisions to show videos or photos).
- Explain to students that each group must reach consensus on each scenario. There should be no voting within groups - purely dialogue.
- Make it point to tell the students that their decision to cover certain stories or air certain videos or photos may result in the military or Pentagon banning them the embedding program (thus losing military protection when in combat areas).
- Distribute one copy of the "Primetime Lineup" worksheet to each group and then give each group their first scenario.

- After about 7 minutes, collect all scenarios and then redistribute them so that each group is given a new scenario.
- After each group has seen each scenario, ask the “networks” to report their decisions to the class.

#### ☆ Closing

- Display this quote on the front board for students to view. "As the first rule of thumb, therefore, you can tell a war story by its absolute and uncompromising allegiance to obscenity and evil" (Vietnam veteran and author Tim O'Brien). Ask students what they think it means. Then ask them if they agree with Mr. O'Brien. Continue the discussion with the questions below if time remaining.

#### ☆ Important Questions to Ask

- Do you believe there should be limits on free press during times of war? Is your current position different from what it was before participating in this activity?
- Should the government try to limit the press or should we expect the media to be responsible enough to not report on something if doing so could have serious adverse consequences?

#### MATERIALS

- network logo signs
- scenario cards
- “Primetime Lineup” worksheet

These materials will facilitate the lesson by helping students organize their thoughts and decisions.

#### EVALUATION

For homework, students will be expected to write a 1-paragraph, typed response to the day’s lesson. One paragraph should be written for each of the following three questions:

1. What are some of the considerations that the media must weigh when deciding whether or not to run a story that deals with the military and/or combat situations?
2. Should the military have the authority to censor the press? If so, in what situations would this be appropriate?
3. The First Amendment protects the media from government infringement. But does that mean that the freedom of the press is unlimited? Give examples to support your answer.

Why have you chosen this approach to evaluation?

Every student will get something different out of this lesson. A written response is therefore a more appropriate means of determining what exactly it is that each student got out of it. Still, the teacher will still be able to assess each student’s understanding of the key points that were taught in the lesson.

#### EXTENSION

Students can research other questionable media decisions relating to the military and/or combat. Some suggestions include:

- Geraldo Rivera writing troop locations in the sand while live for Fox News, perhaps compromising an impending military operation.
- The Washington Post reporting of deplorable conditions at Walter Reed Army Medical Center.
- 60 Minutes airing and The New Yorker printing photos of prisoner abuse at Abu Ghraib.

## Scenarios:

Your network has a cameraman embedded with Marines in Falluja. During a period of heavy fighting, the squad he is with enters a Mosque where a group of dead and wounded insurgents are located. These insurgents had been shot the day before and the survivors had already been treated by a Navy corpsman. While taping, your cameraman hears a marine say about one of the wounded insurgents, "He's f#%&ing faking he's dead - he's faking he's f#%&ing dead." Through his viewfinder your cameraman can see the marine raise the muzzle of his rifle in the direction of the wounded Iraqi. There were no sudden movements, no reaching or lunging. Then, the marine pulls the trigger. There is a small splatter against the back wall and the man's leg slumps down. "Well he's dead now," says another marine in the background. Essentially, your cameraman now has footage of a marine killing a wounded and unarmed Iraqi. Do you air the video?

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2004/nov/23/usa.iraq>

You have a photographer located at a security checkpoint in Tal Afar. Suddenly, a car is coming towards the gate and showing no signs of slowing. The U.S. soldiers on guard fire a couple of warning shots. The car keeps coming. The U.S. soldiers then open fire on the vehicle. It eventually comes to a stop. Upon inspection, the soldiers find two adults dead in the driver and passenger seats and six kids (all alive) in the backseat. One of the children, a 12 year-old boy, has been shot in the stomach. There were no weapons or explosives in the vehicle. Your photographer snaps a photo of a 6 year-old girl weeping, with the blood of her parents on her face and hands. You can see a U.S. soldier standing to the side of her with his gun pointed toward the ground. Do you show the photo and tell the story on your prime time broadcast tonight?

[http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/26/world/middleeast/26censor.html?\\_r=3&oref=slogin&oref=slogin&oref=slogin](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/26/world/middleeast/26censor.html?_r=3&oref=slogin&oref=slogin&oref=slogin)

Matt Bourgeois, 35 from Tallahassee, FL was killed when he stepped on an enemy-placed landmine while conducting small-unit training at Tarnac Farm, an abandoned al Qaeda base near Kandahar, Afghanistan. U.S. troops were training there to remove and neutralize munitions such as land mines. A second Navy SEAL, not identified, was injured by the mine. Your network got a hold of a picture of his coffin being loaded onto a C-17A Globemaster III aircraft from a flight to Ramstein Air Base in Germany. Does your network think it is appropriate to show pictures or footage of flag-draped coffins holding U.S. soldiers?

<http://photos.signonsandiego.com/gallery1.5/warcoffinphotos>

A member of the U.S. Army Rangers was gunned down during a firefight in the Afghan region of Khost. His family was told that he was killed by hostile fire and had shown true bravery during the fight. He was hailed a hero and was posthumously promoted and awarded a Silver Star and a Purple Heart. The story made national headlines. Three years later, your network obtained military records through the Freedom of Information Act, revealing that "Army medical examiners were suspicious about the close proximity of the three bullet holes in the soldiers forehead and tried without success to get authorities to investigate whether the his death amounted to a crime." Based on the characteristics of the entrance wounds, the doctors who performed the autopsy on said it appeared as though he was shot by a United States Navy Mark 12 Mod X Special Purpose Rifle from approximately 10 yards away. It is likely that a Ranger sniper fired the three single shots that formed the shot group on the soldier's forehead. Given the fact that airing this story might reveal a military cover-up, what will your network do with this newfound information?

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A35717-2004Dec4.html>